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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PPP POLICY, DEPOLITICISATION, AND ANTI-POLITICS

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Abstract: This article disentangles the complex relationship between depoliticisation and anti-politics in public-private partnership (PPP) policies and practices. By identifying three social mechanisms that underlie dynamics of depoliticisation in PPPs, namely consultocracy, yield bias, and complex contracting, it contributes to the growing interdisciplinary literature on depoliticisation. The article argues that as depoliticisation continues to evolve, it further increases the unbalance between depoliticisation and politicisation, which has negative implications for democratic governance. The depoliticised logic behind PPPs feeds broad sentiments of political distrust and disappointment, because political decision makers tend to use PPPs as miracle solutions for the delivery of public infrastructure without bearing the long-term budgetary consequences of their own decisions. This constitutes an expectations gap: the difference between what is promised or expected by politicians on the one hand, and what they can actually deliver on the other. It is here that the short-term rationales and incentives of political decision makers collide with the wider public interest in the longer term.

Keywords: Depoliticisation, anti-politics, public-private partnerships, value for money, technocracy

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1. Introduction

This article aims to explore what lessons can be learned from public-private partnerships (PPPs) in terms of depoliticisation and anti-politics. PPPs are long-term public infrastructure projects contracts which are mainly privately financed and operated. These partnerships combine the resources of government with those of private business actors in order to deliver societal goals or services, and share risks and costs related to that service delivery. To date, PPPs have been used to deliver more than 1600 major infrastructure projects with a total value of over 700 billion US dollars (Public Works Financing 2010). In the United Kingdom more than 700 PPP projects, with a total capital cost of 56 billion British pounds, have reached financial close. Projects are found in a wide range of sectors including transport, schools, hospitals, prisons, housing, and defence (HM Treasury, 2014).

This increasing use of PPPs has been crucial in shaping public infrastructure and service delivery (Hodge & Greve 2017; Krumm 2016). While there has been much scholarly attention for PPPs from a variety of disciplines such as economics, law, management, and engineering, a limited number of studies have examined PPPs from a political perspective. This is a striking observation, since infrastructure policy and debates about PPPs are inherently political (Flinders 2005; Skelcher 2010). Roberts (2010) even calls PPPs one of the most powerful empirical illustrations of the pervasive force of the *logic of discipline*. This depoliticisation logic of PPPs can be explained by the analytical framework of Wood and Flinders (2014). In PPPs tasks and responsibilities are transferred from the governmental sphere to the non-governmental sphere through their delegation towards specialised private sector consortia. Consequently, the public nature of infrastructure and service delivery is no longer recognised, and a shift occurs towards rather individualised responses to collective social challenges. The choice for PPPs is portrayed as the only sensible one, because supposedly there is no alternative (Willems & Van Dooren, 2016).

This article has two objectives. First, we aim to refine the depoliticisation argument by using the case of PPP as an illustrative case. It is important to understand the diverse social mechanisms influencing the depoliticisation logic found in privately financed and operated public infrastructure projects. Hay (2014, pp.293–294) claims that empirical studies are particularly capable of bringing into the analysis of depoliticisation a series of new and important insights. That is what we intend to do with this study, as we focus on the specific case of PPPs, which constitutes an understudied case of complex and technical public decision making. We seek to answer the following question: how does depoliticisation manifest itself in the field of PPP? Second, this article aims to take a next

analytical step by explaining how depoliticisation may contribute to the growing anti-politics trend. There seems to be an increasing gap between what is promised by or expected from political decision makers on the one hand, and what they can actually deliver on the other (Flinders 2012). We label this gap the *expectations gap*. PPPs arguably are helpful in delivering short-term gains to elected politicians who are eager to provide highly visible or high-profile infrastructure projects to their communities. However, while PPPs may be politically interesting for project delivery, their results in the long run, that is, in terms of value for taxpayers' money, remain dubious. For instance, Boardman and Hellowell (2016, p.1) state that "governments are drawn to PPPs for many reasons, including their ability to address the so-called 'infrastructure deficit' without adding immediately to official measures of public spending". This growing expectations gap between elected politicians aiming for short-term project delivery success on the one hand, and voters wanting to secure a solid long-term deal for essential public goods and services on the other, will likely trigger political distrust and disappointment (see Hodge 2014).

By combining the perspectives of depoliticisation and anti-politics, we seek to enrich our understanding of the PPP phenomenon. Vice versa, by using the empirical case of PPPs we will create new insights on the complex relationship between depoliticisation and anti-politics. As we disentangle the relationship between depoliticisation and anti-politics in PPPs, we contribute to the debate on the state of our democracies, as well as the political science discipline (Wood 2015). The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly describe what is meant by PPPs and why they are a relevant study object. Second, we explain why PPPs are an important example of depoliticisation by identifying three social mechanisms that are at play: consultocracy, yield bias, and long-term and complex contracting. Third and finally, this article discusses the aforementioned expectations gap, showing how short-term rationales and incentives of political decision makers collide with the general public interest in the long-term.

2. Delineating Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Before we proceed to linking PPP with depoliticisation and anti-politics, we aim to get a better understanding of the PPP phenomenon. We briefly discuss its definition and historical background; its proliferation; and the underlying motivations for governments to embark on PPPs.

What are PPPs?

Scholars have repeatedly tried to define the phenomenon of public-private partnerships, only to find out that its character is too ambiguous to capture in a single definition. Instead, they have come to agree that there is a need to acknowledge the diversity that is inherent to PPP. Several academic contributions elaborate on a classification of PPP in order to captivate that diversity and create an overview. Weihe (2008) comes up with a typology based on the differences between approaches toward urban regeneration, policy, infrastructure, and development. As such, PPP has become an umbrella term for a variety of partnership forms. Hodge and Greve (2010) distinguish five different families: (1) institutional cooperation for joint production and risk sharing, (2) long-term infrastructure contracts that emphasise a tight specification of outputs in long-term legal contracts, (3) public policy networks in which loose stakeholder relationships are emphasised, (4) civil society and community development, and (5) urban renewal and downtown economic development. In this article, we focus on the second of five families. This most visible form of PPP as long-term infrastructure contracts came into vogue in the 1990s, starting in the UK. The British model of PPP is officially called *Private Finance Initiative* (PFI). It was implemented under the Major administration in 1992 and became widely used under Blair's New Labour administration from 1997 onwards. Since then it has spread to other Anglo-Saxon countries and Continental Europe, and it eventually became well-known worldwide (Krumm 2016).

In typical long-term infrastructure contracts, a single private concessionaire is contracted to design, build, finance, maintain, and sometimes operate (DBFM(O)) an infrastructure asset on behalf of a government. The concessionaire holds a lease on the asset from the government for a period of several decades. After this period, the control over the facility goes back to the public sector. A PPP thus involves a *one-covering contract* that incorporates the lifecycle of an infrastructure asset and includes *private financing*. Additionally, in a PPP deal an amount of project *risk* is transferred from the public sector to the private sector, such as financial risk, construction risk, and the risk of subpar service delivery. If the private concessionaire fails to meet a requirement set in the contractual agreement, it has to fix the problem at its own expense, and it may face financial penalties. The result of that would be that it would not recoup its initial investment in the project. Finally, the government will not pay for the asset until it is built, and after completion it will pay periodically recurring fees to the private sector partner throughout the lifecycle of the contract. These fees will reflect the degree of *service delivery*.

Even though there are differences across PPP models, one common rationale ties the various forms and families together, namely that every PPP combines the resources of

governments and businesses with the intention to deliver societal goods or services, and they do so in a way that risks and costs are shared between the two sectors. As such, every PPP involves a “risk-sharing relationship based on a shared aspiration between the public sector and one or more partners from the private and/or voluntary sectors to deliver a publicly agreed outcome and/or public service” (Grimsey & Lewis 2007, p.xiv). In that sense, PPP is not nearly a new phenomenon. Public-private cooperation goes back centuries and has been used in a variety of sectors, including privateer shipping, treasury management, and railway exploitation (Wettenhall 2005). What makes current partnerships different from their historical predecessors, though, is that they have gone through many rebrands and revisions, or different waves as illustrated by Siemiatycki (2015) in Canada. As of today they are mostly seen as a form of project finance wherein the private sector handles the upfront costs for the provision of public infrastructures.

Relevance of PPPs

The proliferation of PPP is reflected in various figures. For instance, the journal *Public Works Financing* (2010) reports that between 1985 and 2010 governments set up more than 1600 major infrastructure projects using a public-private approach. These projects amounted to a combined value of over 700 billion US dollars. In 2014, European national governments closed PPP contracts at a total value of almost 19 billion euro (EPEC 2015). It is likely that the amount is even higher, as the European PPP Expertise Centre may be compromised due to a lack of data availability. As for the UK, a fairly exhaustive overview can be found online. The most recent database (dated March 2015) reported that contracts had been signed for a total number of 724 PFI projects. The total capital value of these projects exceeded 57 billion British pounds. This figure thus excluded the amounts to be spent on projects that were in the procurement phase or in the pipeline (HM Treasury & Infrastructure and Projects Authority 2016). In both the UK and other countries, partnership contracts have been closed in a wide range of sectors: road infrastructure, railways, healthcare, prisons, schools, sports facilities, and wastewater facilities, to mention but a few examples. As of today, it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of public infrastructure investments are done through public-private schemes. PPP is thus not the only game in town, but comprises a considerable part of public expenditures on infrastructures and facilities. It is generally expected to become more important in the future due to tightening government budgets and the urgency of grand societal challenges and

the expensive solutions they require (e.g. climate action, energy transitions, and demographic change). Hence, governments do not seem to have much of a choice but to co-operate with the private sector.

The popularity of PPP has grown significantly over the past couple of decades, as has the popularity of collaborative arrangements in general. In these arrangements, public and private capabilities are brought together in order to find joint, negotiated solutions to societal challenges. Swyngedouw et al. (2003) even argue that the partnership model has become the preferred approach for government, leading to an upward shift in the private sector delivery of public infrastructure. PPPs thus have a clear relevance beyond the world of infrastructure projects and contracts. They have become exemplary of how governments and public agencies work nowadays: in collaboration with private sector actors, in a horizontal (network) structure, and with a high level of complexity. By focusing on the specific example of PPPs it becomes possible to study the difficult notions of depoliticisation and anti-politics in a more hands-on manner, and thereby contribute to achieving a more fine-grained understanding of the state and challenges of democratic governance.

Rationales Behind PPPs

Governments have developed PPP policies for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, their motivations have evolved over time. Hodge and Greve (2013) list 18 of them. The initial reasons to start with PPP were mainly of a budgetary nature, that is, to circumvent restrictions on formal public sector debt levels. It was a way of providing infrastructure without increasing public sector borrowing (as recorded in the public accounts) or taxation levels. PPPs also promised to reduce the pressure on public sector budgets and provide more value for money (VfM) for taxpayers. An important rationale has been that the private sector is assumed to act more efficiently than the public sector. Private companies with their own money at stake supposedly have a better track record of managing projects. They are expected to feel the pressure of creating a better product if they bear a larger risk share. It is assumed that by involving them in all stages of infrastructure provision, better value for taxpayers' money can be achieved (Grimsey & Lewis 2004). Other arguments in support of PPP have included the transfer of risk from governments and citizens to the private sector, improved accountability for performance, better on-time and on-budget infrastructure delivery, greater innovation, and long-term lifecycle benefits (Greve & Hodge 2013).

Although PPP is often portrayed as a new and neutral procurement method for delivering public services, it is a political tool *par excellence* (Hodge & Greve 2017; Siemiatycki 2015). The political choice for PPP delivery has social implications that touch upon the core functions of the state, e.g. public infrastructure and services like roads, schools, hospitals, social housing, prisons, and urban development projects. Some scholars recognised the political consequences of PPP policy over a decade ago (Flinders 2005; Shaoul 2005), but they remain a weak voice in a field that has been dominated by a chorus of financial, legal, engineering, and managerial experts. Hodge et al. (2010) pay attention to the political nature of PPPs and express their concern that the transfer of public tasks and responsibilities to private actors may lead to a broken democratic chain of delegation (see also Skelcher 2010). PPPs are thus problematised for *democratic reasons*. Some authors point explicitly to the principle of ministerial responsibility which is challenged by PPPs (Willems 2014). Because public tasks and responsibilities are shared with private sector partners, ministers who are in charge lose direct control and members of parliament lose oversight and influence (Reeves 2013; Shaoul 2005; Siemiatycki 2007). In addition to the problematic secrecy of PPP contracts, members of parliament, journalists, and citizens often lack the resources and expertise required to scrutinise properly these specialised and technical legal documents. The complexity and technicality of PPP projects and contracts withhold a broad political and public debate from taking place. Moreover, PPPs are problematised for *bureaucratic reasons* as they are portrayed as the only possible way to deliver large public infrastructure projects. It is argued that there is no alternative to making deals with the private sector if governments want to get things done (Flinders & Wood 2014, p.137).

3. Depoliticisation in PPPs

Depoliticisation includes the process of displacing decision making away from elected politicians as well as the increasing exercise of power by non-state actors. Flinders and Wood call it “the denial of political contingency and the transfer of functions away from elected politicians” (2014, p.135). We argue that the relatively young research field of PPPs can add new insights which contribute to a more sophisticated and comprehensive account of the concept of depoliticisation (see Wood & Flinders 2014 who advocate a cross-disciplinary approach). Depoliticisation has hitherto been studied mainly in regard to economic, monetary and fiscal policy (Burnham 2001; Jessop 2014); PPP remains a largely unexplored terrain. The relationship between depoliticisation and PPPs neither is entirely straightforward, nor clear-cut (Willems & Van Dooren 2016).

Although depoliticisation occurs in PPPs, elected politicians remain the key decision makers. Ministers still take the decisions on whether to proceed with a specific long-term infrastructure project or not, and whether to choose the PPP route or not. Members of parliament are informed about these decisions, approve them through voting, and are able to hold ministers accountable. Therefore, Hay (2014, p.302) interprets depoliticisation as the process of erasing the politically contested character of governing. The problem is that it is not about less politics, nor about the end of politics, but about *displaced* and *submerged* politics – a politics which occurs elsewhere, typically on sites and in forums in which it is invisible to the wider public and unamenable to democratic scrutiny. According to Burnham (2001), the depoliticisation of decision making may even serve to enhance political control in certain ways. As Flinders comments, “depoliticisation, in all its forms, represents a dangerous illusion. It is the denial of politics while continuing politics by other means” (2012, p.93). Depoliticisation is therefore not absolute, but happens in a more subtle and implicit manner, as the empirical example of PPPs will illustrate. We explain this in detail by addressing three social mechanisms which reinforce each other and create a *flywheel effect* of stimulating depoliticisation and eventually a sense of political disengagement and distrust among communities.

Consultocracy

PPPs are apt examples of complex and technical public decision-making processes. They form a new frontier of depoliticisation which is partly driven by the rise of private legal advisors, financial consultants and technical engineers (Flyvbjerg et al. 2009, p.352 on the role of these actors in megaprojects and; see also Vigoda-Gadot et al. 2014 on the privatisation of policy formulation). By granting these consultants access to public decision-making processes, the degree of democratic governance is affected. It could also increase the likelihood of planning fallacies, optimism bias, and strategic misrepresentation, since the ones who calculate the risks bear little or no responsibility (Flyvbjerg 2013; Lovallo & Kahneman 2003). Political analyses of the role and impact of these private advisors have been surprisingly scarce (for some exceptions, see Beveridge 2012; Shaoul et al. 2007). Or, as Fischer (2009, p.17) puts it, “despite the central role of professional expertise in the policy decision-making process, political scientists have traditionally considered this subject to fall outside their jurisdiction.” Nevertheless, the rise of consultants in the world of infrastructure projects, as well as their growing influence in this arena, is important to recognise and understand.

Governments across the globe have been employing consultants to perform a great variety of roles and functions. Despite the recent global financial crisis, leading global accountancy companies and management and strategic consultancy firms have seen years of double-digit growth. This growth is largely due to major reforms that governments have had to make in recent years and that have led them to knock on the doors of consultants for help. As an example, the Obamacare health reform boosted healthcare consulting, and bank reforms in Western economies did the same for financial sector consultants (The Economist 2013). The activities and relevance of consultants have clearly increased. Furthermore, the role and influence of specialised legal advisory firms have also greatly expanded in light of the juridification of society (Van Waarden & Hildebrand 2009) and the rise of regulatory governance (Moran 2011).

PPPs also illustrate the strong reliance and dependence of governments on consultancy services (Boardman & Hellowell 2016; Shaoul et al. 2007). Especially in the policy preparation and decision-making phase of PPPs, we have seen that governments have increasingly turned to specialised consultancy and advisory firms who are then asked to help design and implement PPP policies and projects. Hodge and Bowman (2006) claim that a *consultocracy* has emerged which drives the global proliferation of the PPP business. Crouch (2004) argues that there is an unchallengeable ideology on the belief that the expertise of business is superior to that of the government and its public officials. The high level of complexity in PPPs tends to feed this dependency on technical advisors. The large-scale DBFM Schools of Tomorrow program in Belgium (1.5 billion euros) illustrates this. The costs of consultancy services has risen to an unseen 3 million euro (VAT excluded), of which 2 million euro went to juridical advice and 1 million euro to financial and technical support (Flemish Parliament 2016). These modes of practice put at stake the amount of in-house expertise and experience in government agencies in the long run.

There is also an important discursive dimension to the mechanism of consultocracy. The professional community of consultants, PPP units, lawyers and contractors has developed a distinct discourse, or even jargon, which is hard to understand for ministers and other political executives, members of parliament, interest groups, and journalists. PPP professionals talk of special purpose vehicles (SPVs) and DBFM(O) contracts, public sector comparators, risk allocations, and discount rates. This discourse makes it difficult for outsiders to oppose project governance; they may hardly understand the topic of concern. It bears comparison to contesting a taxi bill in a foreign city where you do not know the language, nor the norms nor the unwritten rules. The problem is aggravated by the positive, normative penchant of the PPP jargon. Public and private are said to be partners who are engaged in a competitive dialogue, focusing on risk sharing and using

private expertise. As such, the PPP language game is full of magic words that are hard to oppose (Hodge & Greve 2010). A quote from an interview with a minister in the Canadian province of Ontario (Siemiatycki 2015, p.350) illustrates the explicit rebranding tactics used regarding PPPs, which is to steer away from privatisation and towards alternative financing and value for money. The language does not leave room for alternative options when PPPs are depicted as the logical, rational thing to do (Willems & Van Dooren 2016). Who can be against dialogue and risk sharing between partners? This discursive alienation of policy makers from PPP project governance is a result of the emergent consultocracy and a main driver of depoliticisation.

Yield Bias

The risk of depoliticisation is that monetary value takes precedence over public value. The growing importance of monetary interest has lured public value thinking further into the direction of a financial yield (Van den Hurk & Siemiatycki 2015). Proposed projects with high financial yields have a better chance of being selected. For instance, roads can be tolled and patients can be charged, but projects that deliver non-monetary value will likely have a hard time being selected. Building bike lanes and urban parks, dealing with pollution, and reinforcing embankments may add to livability, sustainability and security, but the merits of these measures are hard to monetise. By granting financial objectives and financial players a more important role in infrastructure delivery, governments have depoliticised processes that used to be anchored more firmly in democratic decision making.

The rise of private financiers in public infrastructure provision reinforces the yield bias. Private financing leads to a *financialisation* of the public sphere (Epstein 2005; Pike & Pollard 2010). While public infrastructure provision has historically been a non-financial activity, governments have begun creating and monetizing infrastructure as an asset class. In doing so, they have expanded the market for private financiers and investors (Ashton et al. 2012, p.201). The considerations and preferences of banks, investors, and other players on the capital market have thus gained influence. Raco (2013) even argues that financial actors have actually taken over responsibilities that should have stayed within the public realm: "Fundamental political questions over the resourcing of public sector infrastructure have become matters for financial experts and officials." In their analysis of the various VfM appraisals used worldwide Boardman and Helwell (2016) also stress the dominance of the financial perspective of the Treasury: it is all about the financial consequences, and not the consequences for society at large.

The yield bias can be further explained with an illustration on how design processes are structured in PPPs. Public controversies over large infrastructure projects are often sparked by visual renderings and replicas of what is planned. Designers, such as spatial planners and architects, play a key role in explaining, visually, the impact of projects. The additional costs of architectural quality can be discussed when designs are proposed. In traditional procurement, designers and architects have an autonomous role separated from the builders. They work for the public commissioner, not for any construction company or financier. Public authorities use the designs to interact directly with citizens and end users during public consultation processes. New design ideas can then contribute to better tendering processes.

The organisational structure of a PPP does no longer allow for a direct line of communication between designers and end users, though. Designers are hired as subcontractors by private sector consortia. They thus work for the private concessionary instead of the government. The concessionary will likely assess the quality of the designers' work primarily on its financial merit. Private companies favor low costs, high profits, and low risk, and as a consequence it is not likely that innovative, high-risk proposals with non-financial benefits, such as visual quality, will be selected. The implication of this is that we can expect to see more mediocre designs coming out of PPP contracts. For instance, Siemiatycki (2014) articulates that out of a database of 3535 DBFM(O) PPPs, only 13 have won major architecture or design awards. In addition, some design award festivals make a categorized distinction between PPP projects and non-PPP projects, which is as such quite striking. Yet, the look and feel of projects is not a trivial matter. Design quality determines how citizens experience infrastructure. As power shifts from architects and designers to contractors and private financiers, the fire of depoliticisation is fueled, which may lead to a form of architecture that is increasingly distant from what communities want or need.

Long-Term and Complex Contracting

Roberts (2010) claims that depoliticisation often comes with the introduction of legal instruments (such as contracts) that accompany the shift of authority. Three contractual characteristics stand out here. First, PPPs usually include a long-term contract in which the government agrees to pay periodically for services provided by private actors, in the form of availability fees. This arrangement reduces the future budget autonomy of a government. When future policy makers intend to change public policy and adjust PPP

contracts, they can foresee costly renegotiations. In this case, depoliticisation limits future policy and budget autonomy. Second, PPPs are regulated by complex, detailed, and inflexible contracts. Third and finally, the often claimed problematic secrecy of documents, which is due to clauses of commercial confidentiality, further complicates public questioning and debating – or even prevent these from taking place (Reeves 2013; Siemiatycki 2007). When it comes to PPPs, the primacy of politics is partly and indirectly shifted away from elected politicians, towards unelected and less accountable private actors. In this section, we briefly discuss each characteristic.

First, a key feature of PPP contracts is that they cover the lifecycle of a project. The private concessionaire does not only build the infrastructure; it also takes responsibility for operations and maintenance for the duration of several decades. The rationale of lifecycle contracting is that the builder will be more attentive to quality when he is also in charge of operating and maintaining the infrastructure. Substandard work in the construction phase will incur higher costs in the operational phase. Therefore, it is assumed that contractors will build sustainably and keep a keen eye on maintenance. However, a depoliticisation of future policy decisions is the other side of the coin here. As availability fees claim public budgets for the duration of the contract, PPP contracts cash in on future policy decisions; the hands of future politicians and policy makers are tied to contract specifications. PPPs have a similar effect on the budget as public debts: they need to be repaid, and hence limit future policy decisions. Krumm (2016) interestingly refers to the notion of *privatised Keynesianism* to explain PPP politics, a notion originally coined by Crouch (2009). Yet, in PPPs this demand-driven economic policy happens in a particularly hidden way, because the investments, as well as the future liabilities in terms of repayment, are not necessarily visible in the public accounts (Greve & Hodge 2013; Shaoul 2005). Moreover, in lifecycle contracts the constraints are stricter because output specifications regarding operations and maintenance are set more firmly than in conventional contracts. Should policy makers want to adjust a gold-plated maintenance scheme of a highway, they are bound to face tough renegotiations. The concessionaire thus holds a strong, even monopolistic position once the contract has been signed.

Second, public and private parties are trying to deal with uncertainty by negotiating solid contracts (Van den Hurk 2016). PPP contracts typically are thick bundles of paper, with hundreds, if not thousands of pages with densely packed legalese. The formula “risks times outputs” helps us understand this inflation of contracts. A key ingredient of a PPP is risk transfer. In order to transfer risk, one needs to identify what the risks are. Ke et al. (2010) identify numerous categories of risk, for instance the instability of government, insolvency of subcontractors, unproven engineering techniques, maintenance

costs, market demand, inflation risk, and force majeure risk. For every risk category, lawyers make concrete descriptions of what a risk specifically comprehends. A second key ingredient of PPP is output specification. Rather than detailing *how* the work needs to be done, the public party needs to specify the *outputs*, for instance the availability of the infrastructure, noise levels, and the frequency of service. Output specifications are very detailed as well. PPP contracts specify what the consequence of each risk would be for the output specifications; hence the formula "risks times outputs". At the end of the day, the contractual complexity overwhelms public officials who supposedly represent the public interest (Raco 2013), but in fact delegate a significant amount of work to consultants; contractual negotiations are not done by public officials and the private companies themselves, but by their respective lawyers.

Third, public and political involvement in the PPP planning processes is an essential safeguard for democratic decision making (Siemiatycki 2007). Transparency is an important means of enforcing accountability and enabling critical political debate on both the substance and the governance of PPP projects. For Flyvbjerg et al. (2003), transparency is the primary means of enforcing accountability:

The role of government is, in principle, to represent and protect the public interest (as defined by Parliament or legal precedent) and therefore it must at all times be possible for the public to verify whether this is indeed the case. The transparency requirement means, *inter alia*, that . . . all documents prepared or commissioned by the government should be released to groups and to the general public as they are produced. (Flyvbjerg et al. 2003, p.111)

While the transparency predicament may be obvious to political science scholars, various pragmatic arguments against transparency have been made by the community of PPP professionals (Siemiatycki 2007). The first argument concerns commercial confidentiality. In the bidding process, commercially sensitive bidder information on innovative techniques, corporate strategies, or delivery mechanisms cannot be released. As a result, the details and evaluation reports of the bids are typically kept confidential. These reports often hold politically relevant information on the merits of different project proposals, but this information is kept out of the public debate. A second reason for confidentiality concerns the bargaining position of the government. Private companies may adapt negotiation tactics to the funds that are available and the changes that are envisaged in the project scope. The extent to which the government is willing to compromise, for instance on the frequency of a service or the cleanliness of trains, is information of tactical or strategic importance in a negotiation. Yet, this information is also politically

relevant and withholding this information may contribute to depoliticisation. While confidentiality clauses should be used sparingly (and not automatically) for the benefit of democratic accountability, the practice of PPP contracting shows that both public and private players often use extensive confidentiality arrangements (Reeves 2013; Siemiatycki 2007; Willems 2014). A shield of confidentiality is established during the bidding process and retained after contract signing. Consequently, public scrutiny *ex post* hence also becomes more difficult and problematic.

It is generally expected that depoliticisation in PPPs will continue to evolve. There is a tendency to reinforce the arguably technocratic features of PPP projects, which in turn strengthens the position of and increases the dependency on specialised private actors. This further induces depoliticisation in such a way that we observe a sort of *flywheel effect*. Consequently, depoliticisation tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, spreading the ideologically non-neutral PPP business worldwide in favour of specialised private firms (see also Boardman & Hellowell 2016, p.2).

4. Anti-Politics and PPPs

We have hitherto argued that a number of social mechanisms are active in PPPs that feed depoliticisation, thereby disturbing the delicate balance between depoliticisation and politicisation (Willems & Van Dooren 2016). Furthermore, we hypothesise that these social mechanisms will gain power and speed, with significant implications for democratic governance. As an example, Skelcher (2010, p.299) states that “PPP’s raise important issues of democratic governance due to the changed nature of the state when it engages in cooperative activities with private actors.” He warns for a democratic deficit due to a shortfall in accountability arrangements. Flinders (2010, p. 120-121) points to “the existence of a splintered logic in the sense that the values and principles on which PPPs are based and promoted are at odds with those traditionally found within the political and public sphere.” The underlying depoliticised logic in complex and technical policy processes like PPPs may contribute to a growing trend of anti-politics, which includes an increasing sense of distrust and disappointment toward political decision makers and politics at large. We observe an increasing expectations gap between what is promised or expected and what can actually be delivered by politicians (Flinders 2012). The case of PPPs provides an illustration of this gap, as we will explain in the remainder of this article.

Mega Credit Card: Buy Now, Pay Later

PPPs have a political logic. They have not only grown popular due to their promise on delivering value for money. PPP is actually also a very useful and successful political tool. Hodge and Greve (2017, p.15) suggest that the “robust political success of the P3 phenomenon along with continued proclamations of success by advocating governments seem to contrast the mixed empirical performance results.” The political performance – delivering new infrastructure without increasing the public sector borrowing ratio – seems to trump the ambiguous project performance of PPPs. While PPPs help deliver various short-term objectives of politicians, including ribbon cutting, they also very much push the cost burden to future governments. After all, the payment mechanism only starts working upon project completion. The real political incentive or driver is to deliver new and attractive infrastructure projects through private financing before the break of election time. What happens later, when the final invoice is delivered to the mailbox, is a matter of concern for the politicians (and citizens) of generations to come. For instance, if something goes wrong with the price tag and outcomes of PPP projects, the responsible minister will likely be long gone. This perversity behind so-called neutral instruments like PPPs feeds sentiments of political anger and disappointment. The tension between short-term gains and long-term pains is obviously not limited or exclusive to PPPs, but in PPPs these tensions become particularly relevant and visible over time.

The debate between politicians and parties on taxes and expenditures is the core of politics. Although in most European countries the policy choice for PPPs is motivated mainly by value for money concerns, in some of them the ambition to keep public infrastructure projects off the public balance sheet still plays an important role. In a recent presentation for the Flemish Parliament, the statistical office of the European Commission, Eurostat, gave an interesting overview of PPP practices in the European Union regarding the off-balance-sheet treatment of projects (Barredo Capelot & Prado Urena, 2016). In the largest EU countries (France, Italy, Germany, Poland and Spain) all or most (over 80 percent) PPPs appear on the government balance sheet. A more heterogeneous picture is only found in the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Belgium, which have some projects on their balance sheet and others off the balance sheet. Eurostat calls Belgium a unique case in the EU, because the statistical treatment plays such a key role in the decision to procure PPPs or not. In fact, in Belgium some contracts have even been amended as many times as needed until the respective projects could be considered to be off the balance sheet. It is exactly this strong rationale to keep public investments outside the books that may become problematic in terms of depoliticisation and anti-politics – especially in cash-strapped countries with huge public debts like Belgium. In

this regard, Hodge and Greve (2007) compare PPP contracting with a mega credit card for governments. The public debt and deficit remain stable because private sector actors (pre)finance the projects. It is only gradually, after the ribbons cutting, that the installments appear in the public budget. And similarly to indebted consumers who lose sight of the debits on their stack of credit cards, governments accumulate stealth debts that do not appear in the official books. PPP contracting is of course not the only source of excess money. The accumulation of traditional public debt has the same potential for depoliticization and anti-politics, but has the advantage of being more transparent and accountable.

Politics of Value for Money

Bearing in mind the PPP credit card, political and public debates on which major projects are needed and how they perform seem no longer a priority. In addition, evaluating PPP performance is a difficult and political act given the different objectives, discourses, and disciplines involved (Siemiatycki 2015). Hodge and Greve (2013) list 18 possible goals or rationales. Depending on the perspective or criteria used in the assessment, a successful project for one person or organisation is a failure for the other. Furthermore, some motivations for PPP have been more sincere than others. Although off-balance-sheet treatment is still the major driving force behind PPPs in some countries, the evasive notion of value for money has become the main rationale over time. Although evaluating value for money seems an easy and straightforward task, in reality it is a rather complex and nuanced exercise. International research on PPP performance shows that PPPs do not nearly always meet the proclaimed expectations (for instance on-time and on-budget delivery, and value for money) (Hodge & Greve 2007; Reeves 2013; 2015). The global financial crisis has further affected the value for money that PPP contracting can deliver, mainly because it has made private financing more expensive (Greve & Hodge 2013).

Siemiatycki and Farooqi (2012) point to the importance of the politics at play behind VfM. Although the selection of a PPP and risk allocation strategy is based on a technical evaluation of a project's merits, the sophisticated nature of VfM assessment cannot hide the inherently political character of a decision. Also, Boardman and Hellowell (2016) underline the importance of the chosen discount rate and methodology to determine whether PPPs lead to more value for money. Adjusting a few technical assumptions or parameters in the VfM assesment can already lead to totally different results and open the door to potential political influencing. Empirical research shows that PPP is a rather

expensive way of delivering infrastructure (Boardman & Hellowell 2016; Siemiatycki & Farooqi 2012). Consequently, PPP contracting provides decision makers with excess money for deals that may be politically appealing, but often lack a solid business case or come with a high price (Boardman & Vining 2012). The involvement of private corporations does not necessarily bring along better due diligence. Strikingly, private companies often have nothing to lose in PPPs, because many risks of project failure ultimately remain in the hands of the public sector. In Belgium, the privately financed and operated Liefkenshoek Tunnel project, a toll road tunnel in the port of Antwerp, went bankrupt in the early 1990s, forcing the Flemish government to step in and take over the debts. Likewise, the taxpayer bailout of the bankrupted Metronet, one of the two firms charged with upgrading the London Underground network following a multi-billion-British pound PPP deal, is a renowned case in which the government had to get financially involved given the necessity of the Underground for the city (The Economist 2007).

The UK Treasury Select Committee concluded in 2011 that PFI does not provide taxpayers value for money (HM Treasury Select Committee 2011). In addition, the UK Public Accounts Committee has stated that returns to investors have been too high and have led to high excess costs for public authorities. Furthermore, they found no convincing evidence of better value for money in PFI projects. PPPs often led to windfall profits for private executives, while public benefits are left unclear and languishing in the long term (Hellowell & Vecchi 2013). In sum, while major amounts of public funding continue to be invested in public-private endeavors, there continues to be a lively scholarly debate on whether PPPs actually deliver value for money (Siemiatycki & Farooqi 2012); whether they do lead to a better care of public assets and services (Raco 2013); whether governments have been able to make good deals with the private sector in terms of the price they pay and the quality they receive (Vecchi et al. 2013); and whether they are democratically legitimate at all (Shaoul 2005).

It's the Expectations Gap, Stupid!

Putting the aforementioned criticism of off-balance-sheet financing and dubious value for money aside, PPPs do help governments in putting costly infrastructure funding on the public agenda and get projects implemented on time and on budget. In other words, they help political decision makers to get things done in times of budgetary and financial difficulties and raising expectations of the public. Nevertheless, while PPPs are politically performing in terms of making projects possible, their project performance in the long run, that is, in terms of value for money for taxpayers, is ambiguous, to say the least

(Hodge & Greve 2017; see also Boardman et al. 2015). This growing expectations gap between elected politicians aiming for short-term project delivery success on the one hand, and the public wanting to secure a fair and good deal in the long run for essential public goods and services on the other, may trigger feelings of political distrust and frustration. While politicians promise to deliver a lot of new and state-of-the-art public infrastructure projects, they refuse to tell the whole truth about how to pay for them, nor do they explain in detail the increased role and impact of private sector consortia in delivering them. As indicated by the former Flemish Government's Architect, Peter Swinnen, in his policy note:

The construction of public infrastructure and community facilities by private institutions is not just an innocent trend. The most interesting private partner from a commercial point of view has a large say in the future of our cities, our infrastructure, our homes, our healthcare, and so on. This does not have to lead to failure, provided that the public and private actors strive for the realisation of a common project and thereby premise the same societal values. [However,] in reality this happens seldom or not at all. What is an urgent need for one actor, is just a commercial opportunity for the other. (Swinnen 2010)

5. Conclusion

Depoliticised PPPs put great demands on future public decision making. The recognition of the political nature of PPPs is an illustration of a larger agenda of re-politicising public decision making. Certain policy choices are too easily accepted, and some policy debates are too easily silenced by claiming incorrectly that they are either unavoidable or logical according to econometric models (Jessop 2014, p.216). PPP contracting holds the risk of muted political controversy over infrastructure projects, yet it is exactly these controversies that are needed for a genuine political debate. Depoliticisation reduces the autonomy for both present-day and future politicians and suggests that there is no alternative to financing and operating the proposed public infrastructure than through private sector consortia or special purpose vehicles. PPPs thus constitute an important empirical micro-case of depoliticisation.

In this article, we have disentangled the complex relationship between depoliticisation and anti-politics in PPPs. By identifying three social mechanisms that underlie depoliticisation in PPPs (the consultocracy in the PPP business, a strong yield bias in projects driven by financial rationales and specialists, and complex contracting), the article contributes to the growing interdisciplinary literature on depoliticisation. We argue that

there are good reasons to assume that depoliticisation is most likely to continue to proliferate further and eventually lead to an unhealthy unbalance between depoliticisation and politicisation, with negative implications for democratic governance. It is likely that the depoliticised logic behind PPPs will eventually feed sentiments of political alienation and frustration, because politicians tend to use PPPs as a miracle solution to public infrastructure challenges without bearing the major budgetary consequences of their own decisions. After all, the repercussions of their own work are shifted to future generations of taxpayers. PPPs are thus a prime example of a complex and technical tool that can easily be (mis)used by policy makers for political reasons to promise more than they can deliver, and to deliver more than they can afford. As a result, an expectations gap comes to exist which threatens the sincerity and authenticity of public decision making.

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